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Tavira – a dog's eye view

Just published is a refreshingly irreverent view of the serious matter of the history of Tavira.



Pongo the pirate

Peter Bellchambers had the intriguing idea to present the history of this ancient town through the eyes of a podengo dog, and he and his wife Yvonne have constructed their book on this line. They take the view that the podengo breed, along with olive and carob trees, was imported to Iberia by the Phoenicians.

The star of this book is Pongo the Podengo. He is based on Rudi, their friends' real-life podengo. Podengos are known in dog circles as Portuguese Podengos, but the idea that they came originally from the Levant with the Phoenicians makes a charming innovation.

All podengo dogs are hardy, intelligent and lively, loyal and fearless, and the smaller variety (such as Pongo) makes keen hunters of rabbits and, as the book shows, also of cats.

Peter and Yvonne met in 1988 as they worked in the Algarve, he as a landscape architect at Pine Cliffs near Albufeira, and she as an interior designer at Quinta do Lago. They moved to France, where they spent the next 30 years.



The pirate menace

Clearly needing a change, in 2016 they bought a run-down 16th century townhouse near the centre of Tavira and, after a deal of renovation work, moved into their new house in 2018. Now citizens of this venerable town, they take pride in their knowledge of its history and have plans to contribute to its betterment.

As a talented artist, Peter decided to draw images of historic events in Tavira (through the dog's eyes, clearly).

Whilst in France, he had the idea of collecting maps and images of his local town, many from the internet and some from old post-cards. From this collection of images, he created contrasting scenes of then and now, and launched a public exhibition of his work.

Here in Tavira, he decided to make a similar study, but with the aim of publishing a book rather than staging an ephemeral exhibition. Taking events of historic importance, he has created drawings to contrast with present-day photographs of the same scenes, which Yvonne has illustrated with a storyline.



Old theatre

In order to help the reader to assess the position of each scene in the history of the town, the book includes a time-line which helps to avoid the difficulty of finding exact dates, yet gives an overall chronological framework. Each page also shows a small sketch plan to indicate the exact location of each event.

Whilst it is difficult to photograph scenes reminiscent of the Phoenician era, Peter has at least shown the areas in which the Phoenicians made their presence felt, some 3000 years ago.

One particularly interesting plan shows how the river in Tavira has been channelled into a much narrower course. This change in course was greatly influenced by the use, over centuries, of water- and tide-mills, used for the milling of wheat mainly for home consumption.



New Theatre

After Portugal began to establish its fortress empire in Morocco, much of the flour product was exported to the garrisons on the Moroccan coast. These water-driven mills inevitably drew much of the scouring force of the river water, and led to the continuous silting of the mouth of the River Gilão.

The fascination in this plan is the way in which Peter shows the location of various large modern buildings (such as the newly-constructed theatre, the Vila Galé Hotel and the Pingo Doce supermarket). Each of these buildings is located in the area which used to be under seawater.

In common with other coastal locations, Tavira was subject to raids by pirates from the Barbary coast. In a drawing which portrays something of the panic which must have affected the ordinary citizens of the town, a mother desperately drags her children away from the river borne menace.



Pessoa in Bishop's Square

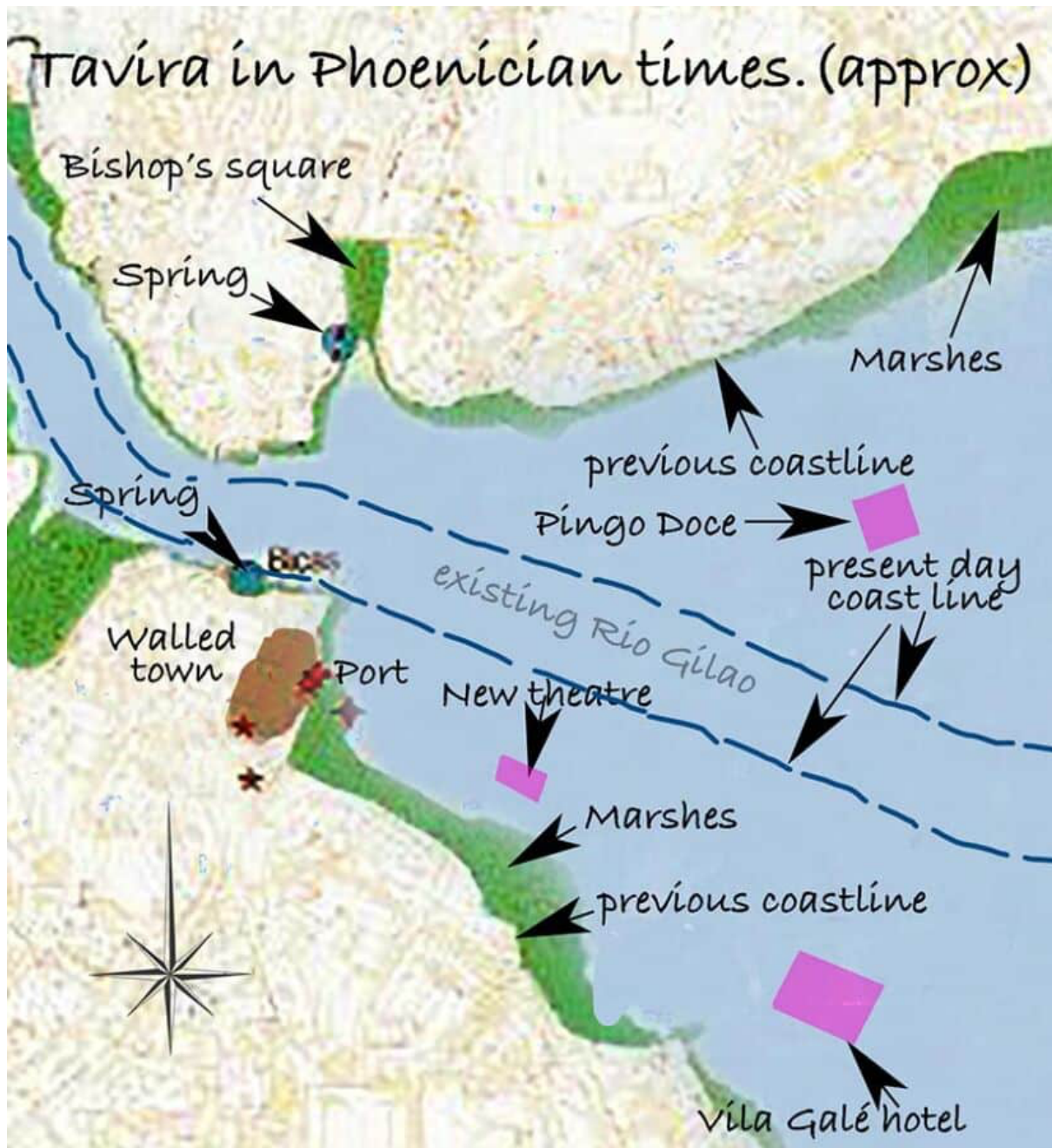
In 1917, just after the death of Dr António Padinha, the forward-looking President of the Câmara, Tavira decided to build a new theatre in the centre of the town. Known as Teatro Popular, this building survived for a century, although it became increasingly dilapidated, before the Câmara decided to completely rebuild the old structure.

Many people contemplate the outcome with dismay. The modern block-style building towers over its medieval neighbours, and instead of the graceful lines of the old building, we now have a building which looks more like a grain silo.

Tavira is justly proud of its Tavira-born poet Álvaro de Campos, who is really a heteronym created by Portugal's greatest 20th century poet Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa spent some of his summer holidays in Tavira and, having discovered the address of Pessoa's aunt, Peter has created a drawing which features her house and incorporates Pessoa himself, together with a number of other heteronyms.

The book captures many other dramatic and historic incidents in the life of the town of Tavira, including the Great Earthquake, pirate raids, fires and floods. Tavira has not had an easy life since the Phoenicians were here, but it has been a life packed with interest.

This book is written in English with a Portuguese translation on each page by Susana Duarte. Not only are we able to learn more about the history of Tavira town, but we can also enjoy the same senses expressed in more colloquial Portuguese. There are 116 pages in this delightful little book, with photographs and drawings on every page.



Tavira map

Now that they have finished and published their book, Peter and Yvonne are keen to move on to their next project.

With his background as landscape architect, Peter is keen to make a difference to the urban landscape of the town. In particular, he is interested in greening the urban space and in creating more traffic-free zones within the town centre.

This second aim is one which most Tavira residents would support both in terms of reducing the exhaust pollution in the town centre and in making more pedestrianised areas. And more trees in the town centre? Although after 3000 years,

Pongo the Podengo is scarcely plaiting his legs, more trees will definitely get his vote!

If you would like to obtain a copy of this new-style history, you should direct your steps to the independent bookshop: Euclides (Papelaria-Livraria), Rua Almirante Cândido dos Reis, 177-8800 Tavira. Alternatively, you might attend one of Peter's presentations for the Algarve History Association, where copies will be available for sale. The first takes place on October 10 in Tavira Library at 6pm and the second in Lagoa Library on October 11 also at 6pm.

Read more from [Peter Booker](#) about [The Churches of Tavira](#) or [The Algarve floods of 1894](#).

Peter Booker

Peter Booker co-founded with his wife Lynne the Algarve History Association.
www.algarvehistoryassociation.com